Russian Short Stories

Demir-kayá

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Demir-kayá by Aleksandr I. Kuprin

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(An Eastern Legend)

The wind has subsided. It is possible that we shall have to spend the night in the open sea. It is about thirty versts to the shore. The two-mast ship is lazily rolling from side to side. The white sails are hanging helplessly.

A white fog envelops our boat. Neither the stars, nor the sky, nor the sea, nor the night are visible. We strike no light.

Seid-Ahbly, the old, barefooted, mud-covered captain of the boat, tells us a story in the truth of which I believe with my whole heart. His voice is low, dignified, and deep. And I believe in the truth of his story because the night is so strangely silent, because the invisible sea is slumbering under our feet.

And, enveloped by the fog, we are sailing slowly in the midst of the thick white clouds.

His name was Demir-Kayá. In your language, it means “Iron Rock.” He was given this name because he knew neither pity, nor shame, nor fear.

His band of robbers was active in the vicinity of Stamboul, in blessed Thessaly, in mountainous Macedonia, and in the fertile pastures of Bulgaria. He himself had killed ninety-nine human

beings, and among them were women, old men, and children.

But one day a powerful army of the Padishah—may Allah bless his days!—surrounded him in the mountains. For three days Demir-Kayá defended himself like a wolf brought to bay by a pack of dogs. On the morning of the fourth day, he cut his way through the ranks of his besiegers and escaped—alone. Part of his band perished during the struggle, the other found death at the hands of the hangman upon the round square of Stamboul.

Wounded and bleeding, Demir-Kayá lay by the fire in the inaccessible cave where he found refuge with wild shepherds of the mountains. But in the middle of the night a bright angel with a flaming sword appeared before him. And Demir-Kayá recognized Azrail, the messenger of death sent from heaven. And he said:

“Let the will of Allah be done. I am ready.”

But the angel said:

“No, Demir-Kayá, your hour has not yet come. Hearken now to the will of God. When you will arise from what is almost your deathbed, go forth and dig out of the earth all your treasures and convert them into gold. Then you will walk on toward the east, on and on, until you come to a place where seven roads meet. There you will build for yourself a house with large, cool rooms, with broad divans, with fountains of pure water, with a place where travellers can partake of your repast, drink aromatic coffee, and rest when they are tired. Invite them to your house, all who go past, and serve them as though you were their slave. Let your house be their house, let your gold

be their gold, let your labor be rest to them. And know that the time will come when Allah will forgive your heavy sins, will forgive you the blood of his children."

"But what sign will the Lord send me to show that my sins have been forgiven?"

And the angel replied:

"Out of the fire that is smouldering by your side take a burnt log, covered with ashes, and plant it in the ground. And when the dead tree will become covered with bark, and will begin to bloom, then the hour of your deliverance will have arrived."

Twenty years went by. Throughout the whole land of the Sultan—may Allah bless his days!—the house at the crossing of the seven roads, on the way from Jedda to Smyrna, was famous. The beggar went away from that house with rupees in his bag, the hungry went away after a rich repast, the tired went away rested, and the wounded went away cured.

For twenty years, for twenty long years, Demir-Kayá turned his gaze every evening to the marvellous stump of wood dug into the ground of his courtyard, but the wood remained black and dead. And the eagle eyes of Demir-Kayá grew dull, and the hair on his head became as white as the angel's wings.

But one morning, early, he heard hurried hoof-beats on the road and saw a horseman galloping toward him. Demir-Kayá ran to him, seized the horse by the reins, and began to beg the horseman:

"Brother mine, won't you enter my home? Step in and refresh your face with water, strengthen yourself with food and drink,

and sweeten your breath with the pleasant odor of smoke."

But the traveller exclaimed in wrath:

"Let me go, old man, let me go."

And he spat into Demir-Kayá's face, and he struck him on the head with the handle of his whip, and galloped on.

Then the proud blood of the robber flamed up in Demir-Kayá. He lifted a heavy stone from the ground, cast it after his offender, and broke his head. And the horseman fell to the ground on the dusty road.

With terror in his heart, Demir-Kayá ran to him and said sadly:

"Brother mine, I have killed you."

But the dying man answered:

"It was not you that killed me, it was Allah's hand. Listen to me. The Pasha of our district is a cruel, greedy, and unjust man. My friends have conspired to assassinate him. But I was won over by a rich reward. I wanted to betray them, and it was when I was hurrying with this information that the rock cast by you stopped me in my haste. The Lord wills it. Farewell."

With grief in his heart, Demir-Kayá returned to his home. The ladder of virtue and repentance that he had been ascending patiently for over twenty years had suddenly broken down under him and fallen to the ground on that summer morning.

In despair he turned his gaze once more to the spot where it was wont to pause, upon a black-burnt piece of wood. But, lo! A miracle! Before his very eyes the dead tree was springing to life, was becoming covered with green buds. A moment, and it

was in full bloom, with gentle yellow flowers interspersed in fragrant foliage.

Then Demir-Kayá fell on his knees and wept for joy. For he realized that the great and merciful Allah in his inexpressible wisdom had forgiven him the murder of ninety-nine innocent beings for the death of one traitor.